

AGAINST THE GRAIN: SOUTHERN RADICALS AND PROPHETS, 1929-1959. By Anthony P. Dunbar. Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1981. Pp. ix + 306. \$16.95.

Reviewed by J. Morgan Kousser

More than most Americans, white Southerners have been conscious of their history, and, much more than most, have tried, sometimes with open, sometimes with covert self-consciousness, or even, perhaps, unconsciously, to refashion that history into convenient, serviceable patterns. The dominant, familiar myth has been conservative, its characters the cavalier planter, the happy slave, the valiant and romantic Confederate cavalryman, the evil or just ignorant Yankee Reconstructionist, the paternalistic New South industrialist, the cosmopolitan, forward-looking Progressive politician or newspaper editor. The competing, less well-known tradition, crafted initially by Yankees, but since the 1920s, primarily by dissenting Southerners, black as well as white, serves different purposes and has different stock characters, more villains than heroes: the brutal slaveholder and postbellum bossman, the rebellious slave, the anti-aristocratic, populist, hill-country small farmer, the exploitative capitalist and his brutal minions, the long-suffering but rebellious sharecropper or miner or lint-head, and the idealistic organizer who seeks to help in the liberation of the underclass. This book, a series of narratives about some of these organizers by the Southern Field Secretary for Amnesty International, Anthony Dunbar, falls into the second tradition. It is an attempt to create a usable past for Southern radicals.

A sympathetic but careful work based primarily on interviews and the extensive document collections of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) and of the socialist cleric Howard Kester, *Against the Grain* chronicles the interwoven activities, largely during the 1930s, of a set of Christian socialists — Myles Horton of Tennessee's Highlander Folk School, H.L. Mitchell of the STFU, Claude Williams of Commonwealth College in Arkansas, the itinerant agitator Don West, Jim Dombrowski of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare, and Kester. Native Southerners, almost all were born to poverty and came to what Dunbar calls the "radical gospel" under the seminary school influence of such "social gospel" teachers and theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr and Vanderbilt's Alva Taylor. Arbitrary arrests, brutal beatings, threats, defrockings, and witch hunts hardened their radicalism, which, though never crystallized in a systematic philosophical statement, aimed at economic and racial equality and a vague Christian commonwealth, and viewed the world as a class struggle. Except for Horton's partial successes (his wife wrote "We Shall Overcome" and Highlander trained civil rights as well as labor union organizers), their efforts to build a Southern movement failed. Why?

Historians have offered five general explanations for radical failure in America: the workers' comparative prosperity; their individualism, conservatism, and/or racism or ethnocentrism; the organizers' poor analyses or lack of persistence; repression; and internecine war within radical movements. Dunbar, who never formulates questions this analytically, whose biographical approach discourages comprehensive treatments even of such connected series of events as individual strikes, and who introduces no control group of subjects as a way of testing his explanations, implicitly rejects the first three hypotheses, and wavers between the last two. Indeed, one of the most interesting features of his internalist movement history is the story of the bitter struggles between

Socialists, Trotskyites, and Communists, which led to the breakup of the STFU and the Southern Conference, and which seriously undercut Highlander and Commonwealth. Although no red-baiter, Dunbar is much harsher on the C.P. than several recent students of northern labor unions have been.

Because Dunbar refuses to go beyond his scattered sources, to set his narrative firmly in a larger context, or to draw systematic parallels between his and other movements, *Against the Grain* amounts mainly to pleasantly written radical antiquarianism, a crazy-quilt, fascinating in detail, but without a consistent overall pattern. Why did left-socialist activist J.B. Matthews, erstwhile close friend of Kester, become a chief investigator for the Dies and McCarthy committees? How did the experiences of Dunbar's radical gospellers differ from those of organizers in Gastonia or Harlan County, River Rouge or Delano, Paterson or Selma? Most of all — an observer watching the economy unravel fifty years later might ask — at a time (during the 30s) when Southern sharecroppers making a dollar a day were being undercut by unemployed men who stood in line for 75 cents a day jobs, why didn't more people revolt?

J. Morgan Kousser is Professor of History and Political Science at the California Institute of Technology.

* * *